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TUAREG CULTURAL SUMMARY

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The Tuareg are Berber-speaking nomadic stockbreeders who live in the Western Sahara and adjacent regions of the Sudan. They fall into seven main groups or political units, comprising around 240,000-300,000 individuals (excluding Negro slaves). The Tuareg speak various dialects of Tamahaq, which is a form of Senhadjan Berber. The peculiarity of Tamahaq as a Berber language is that it can be written with its own characters, which are called tifinagh.

The Tuareg of the Sahara proper are grouped into three confederations: the Tassili-n-Ajjer, the Ahaggar, and the Adrar-n-Ifughas, distributed in that order from northeast to southwest. The Ahaggar confederacy, isolated in the heart of the Sahara desert and the most extensively studied to date, will serve as the sample for the following summary of Tuareg culture. The Ahaggar Tuareg number around 4,400 and comprise twenty-six clans. Approximately 4,000 Negro slaves are attached to the Ahaggars.

The question of the origin and early history of the Tuaregs is still unresolved. Aside from certain somatic traits such as tall stature, an arm span often greater than their height, smooth or

105 wavy black hair and a lack of hirsuteness, the chief distinguishing characteristics of the Tuaregs are the unity of their language, their use of tifinagh characters, and their complex social organization, with its matrilineal and matriarchal elements. Their history, going back to their first contact with Moslem Arabs (probably Shorfa missionaries from Morocco) in the seventh or early eighth century, is one of incessant conflict between Negro kingdoms and Tuareg, between Arabs and Tuareg, and between different Tuareg tribes. They were more or less united under a noble tribe, the Imenanes, until the middle of the seventeenth century, when the Imenanes, following defeat in battle, were obliged to divide their lands and authority. The partition into the present groups dates from that time.

The Tuareg possess a highly stratified and complicated social system. In general they are divided into three main classes: the Tuareg nobles, imochar, the Tuareg vassals, imrad, and a third lower class comprised of Negroid and mixed people grouped into three castes based on occupation (gardeners, harratin, domestics and slaves, iklan, and artisans, inaden). Rank is a quality of the clan rather than the individual, for the Tuareg speak of "noble clans" and "vassal clans." The Ahaggar confederacy is made up of three tribes: the Kel Bela, the Tegehe Mellet, and the Taitoq, each headed by a noble clan which gives its name to the tribe as a whole. Noble clans

105 and their dependent vassal clans are arranged in order of precedence, and the chief of the premier clan (the Kel Bela) is also chief of the Kel Bela tribe and ipso facto the paramount chief, amenokal, of the Ahaggar confederacy. Vassal clans are the traditional pastoralists, camel and goat breeders. They hold exclusive pasturage rights to a definite territory upon which no one may encroach without permission excepting the noble clans, who are always free to use the pasture of their vassal clans. Many Tuareg also own garden plots in agricultural centers which are leased to harratin share croppers or are worked by slaves.

All vassal clans pay tribute to their tribal chiefs, who in turn pay it to the paramount chief, the amenokal. Tribute is normally in grain and/or livestock. In return, the noble clans pledge to supply the warriors and protect their vassals in case of external aggression. Chieftainship is hereditary in the female line, but within fairly broad and seemingly rather indefinite limits of degree of relationship, so that an undesirable heir apparent can easily be passed over in favor of a less direct but more acceptable heir. The chief is chosen from the premier clan of the tribe by a council made up of male heads of households and is confirmed in his office by male representatives of all the component clans of his tribe.

105 Tribal chiefs act as judges, and the amenokal is chief justice of his confederation. The amenokal's symbol of leadership is an enormous war drum called a tobol. This instrument is so representative of command to the Tuareg that they often refer to the amenokal and his whole clan as tobol. The original role of the paramount chief was that of a war leader, and in normal times he still arbitrates conflicts. In principle, he has the power of life and death; on the other hand, in his national role, vis-à-vis neighboring or foreign tribes, the amenokal's decisions do not have full authority unless they have been approved by an assembly of notables called the arollan. This assembly is composed of the principal chiefs of all the factions, plus the nobility. It should be emphasized at this point that the position of a Tuareg clan is not firmly fixed within the framework of the confederation. Component clans may break away from the tribe and attach themselves to a more powerful tribe. At least one clan, the Ibotenaten, was reduced from noble to vassal status by a crushing defeat suffered in the course of a blood feud. In all the Tuareg confederations, the vassals, or imrad, outnumber the nobles in the ration of five to one.

Both manual labor and domestic service are performed by the third class in the Tuareg society. This class is composed of

105 heterogeneous and ethnically mixed peoples living in symbiotic relationship with their masters, the Tuareg. The iklan are the Negro slaves or descendents of former slaves who are attached to Tuareg families and take care of herding, cooking, and all other domestic chores. The artisans and smiths of the Tuareg are the inaden of mixed racial origin, who manufacture all that the nomadic Tuareg needs and in addition act as barber-surgeons. These form a closed caste and are found in single families or small numbers at agricultural centers or attached periodically to Tuareg encampments. The third group are the harratin, Negroid sedentary tenant farmers who rent land from the Tuareg and work it on share cropping basis. The Tuareg hold the three groups in low social esteem.

The economy of the nomadic Tuareg is based on conservational domestication of camels, goats, and hairy sheep, and on crop sharing with the harratin tenant gardeners. The once flourishing caravan trade of the Tuareg has been largely destroyed by mechanized competition, while the exaction of toll charges from passing caravans of other groups and the practice of systematic raiding has been suppressed by French authorities. The Tuareg pitch their camps in or close to mountain massifs, of which the most important are Ahaggar and Tassili-n-Ajjer. Rainfall is

105 irregular, and a persistent vegetation cannot generally exist outside river valleys and depressions. Pasturage is either very sparse or very scattered, with the result that the people are continually breaking up into small and highly mobile camp units moving at intervals of between a week to a month, always within the territorial limits of the tribe. Herds of camels and flocks of goats and hairy sheep constitute the bulk of the capital investment and the primary basis of the economy. Trade used to be very important, with salt the chief article of export. In July, salt from local mines, camels, donkeys, and dates (from oases in the north) were taken south to markets in Nigeria and exchanged for millet, cotton cloth, tea, sugar, and tobacco. This trade is still practiced, but on a very limited scale.

The Tuareg live on the products of their animals, but meat and milk are not enough, especially in dry years. The basic elements of their diet are milk, millet, and dates. Millet, enelè, is cultivated both in the Saharian oases and the Sudan. It is usually crushed with pestles and winnowed to keep only the white flour, which is used in many dishes. Asink is the national dish: coarse millet flour is boiled into thick porridge to which fine sifted flour is later added. This is served with milk and/or butter. Milk, another basic food, is drunk fresh, sour, or curdled, and is also

105 made into butter and cheese. Meat is highly preferred, but is eaten irregularly. The meat most used is that of goats. Mutton is eaten less often, and camel only in exceptional circumstances, since camels are very rarely slaughtered for food. Meat of gazelles and wild sheep is highly esteemed but is not frequently available. Practically speaking, the Tuareg never eat fresh vegetables, but they do use dried onions and tomatoes. Chicken, eggs, and fish are never eaten by the Tuareg. They drink water, milk, and tea. Green tea is very popular and is served aromatized with mint or other local herbs. Coffee is rarely used and then only medicinally.

Shelter takes the form of small lightweight tents of leather or sometimes grass huts. Clothing is loose, voluminous, and light in weight. Men wear a dark blue or black combination veil and turban that covers all of the head and face except for the eyes. These veils are not removed, even for eating. Women go barefaced but with a head kerchief.

Although the Tuareg still retain many of their pre-Islamic magico-religious beliefs and practices, they are all nominally Moslems. They are known to be lukewarm as to religion, and even the important annual Moslem fast of Ramadhan is not generally observed. Occasionally some fanatic North African Moslem sect

105 (such as the Sanussi of Libya) may rally one clan or another of the Tuareg to its cause. But these conversions do not last long, and the Tuareg revert to a passive, vague form of Islam which is permeated by local superstition and magic. Amulets are very common, and belief in jinns and spirits is not confined to women. Several Marabout and Shorfa families (all claiming some descent from the prophet Mohammad or his Arab clan) are found in the area, and some run Koranic schools in the garden centers. These Marabouts may be called upon by the Tuareg to write amulets or to say prayers at funerals, but in no way are they as active or powerful as they are in the rest of North and West Africa.

Marriage is usually, though not always, within the clan. Cross-cousin marriage is said to be the preferred pattern. Statistically, however, the most common type is for a man to marry a maternal cousin or her daughter. In this way a man and his father may belong to the same matrilineage. The question of Tuareg matriarchy is debatable. The Tuareg practice a system of double descent, following matrilineal principles in specific cases and patrilineal in others, while for rules of residence both principles are acknowledged. Traditionally, the matrilineal principle is valid for (1) succession to chieftainship (since a Tuareg child

105 always inherits rank and position through his mother) (2) succession to land rights, and (3) succession to property considered indivisible. Islamic rules of inheritance, on the other hand, are valid for inheritance of individually owned property. Children inherit in such a way that a son gets twice the amount allotted to a daughter. Authority is vested in the father, never the maternal uncle or the mother. A newly married couple live in the camp of the bride's parents for about a year, then usually move over to the camp of the husband. Tuareg camps are known by the name of the highest ranking male member of the community. A widowed woman and her unmarried children are usually taken into the family circle of her brother. It is a peculiarity of the Tuareg social organization, which seems to be based on essentially matrilineal and patriarchal extended and joint family clans, in that it resembles groups in West Africa rather than their immediate neighbors, the Arabs or the Berbers.

The usual age for marriage is twenty to twenty-five for women and close to thirty for men. Monogamy is the universal rule, and divorce is both unusual and generally frowned upon. A bride price is given to the parents of the bride, part of which is turned over to the bride as her personal property. She retains full title to this and to any other wealth she has, and is under no obligation

105 to contribute to the household expenses. Women are treated with respect and deference, but they can hold no office nor exercise any command beyond the limits of their tents. Premarital relations between the sexes are conducted at social gatherings, the chief function of which seems to be getting the young people to know each other. These gatherings or "open houses" are of two main types: tendi and ahal. Tendi are held on the afternoon, and ahal at night. At both types, young men and women, dressed in their best, gather in open areas around one or more young women who play musical instruments, sing, or recite poetry. Often the group participates in singing, storytelling, or improvising poetry. Such a gathering is a perfect occasion for young people to show their wit and musical abilities and to arrange secret rendezvous.

Marriage always involves a bride price, which varies according to the beauty and social standing of the bride and the wealth of the husband. Wedding festivities take place in the bride's camp. Children are highly desired in the community, and the sterility of one of the partners is one of the few valid causes for divorce. Nursing lasts from two to two and one half years, with boys being nursed a little longer than girls. All boys are circumcised collectively when they are three or four years old. The occasion is a

105 simple one, and there are no special festivities. Children hang around the camp, the boys helping their fathers with the herding while the girls assist their mothers. At the age of fifteen or sixteen, "when the hair on the face begins to show," the father gives his son a blue veil called a tidjelmoust. This is usually done at the annual Moslem feast. Along with the veil, the boy is given some good advice by his father and gifts of tobacco from his mother and sisters. With the wearing of the veil, the boy has entered the class of men.

The men's veil, or tidjelmoust, is the most distinctive and arresting article of clothing among the Tuareg. Self-respecting Tuareg think it shockingly indecent for a man to let his mouth be seen by anyone to whom he owes formal respect; nor will he show his face to anyone whose social standing he considers superior to his own. The veil is always arranged so that the eyeslit is as narrow as possible. The standard variations in ways of wearing the veil are indicative of the social status, tribal and clan affiliations, and even the moods of the wearer. The most preferred veils are dyed indigo, though many make do with black ones.

Death is not feared by the Tuareg. The deceased are washed, draped in new clothes, and buried in a nearby high spot. If a

105 Marabout is available, he reads the Moslem prayers. There is no wailing nor any public display of sentiment. The camp is immediately broken and the place is not used again. Condolences often include the following formula: "You are fortunate, for the one you love is now in the paradise of God."

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